

[Mr. George Richmond]

W15921

Richmond

Francis Donovan

Thomaston,

Thursday, Dec. 1 '38

Mr. George Richmond:

"How'd the people used to live forty-fifty years ago? Lived the same's they do now, hand to mouth. I don't know's they was so much better off, they was and they wasn't. They might have saved money, [?] buyin' in bulk, true enough, but some things [?] used to be high, same as they be now.

"Winter time, especially, things'd be high. Used to stock up on everything they could, potatoes and the like of that, and the women always did a lot of cannin'. Put up enough preserves in the fall to last 'em all winter.

"You couldn't [?] get oranges and fresh fruits. Pinapples came high. So they used to put up a lot of pears and peaches. My mother used to put up 75 to 100 jars of fruit and berries in the fall. We used to have squash pies in the fall too, but we'd keep the hard squash, Hubbard squash, until Christmas to make Christmas pies. In the winter time we'd get more fresh meat. The farmers would dress off their stock and turn it into market and it would be fairly cheap. Butter and eggs was usually high in the winter. George Bradstreet over here he got 65 cents a pound for butter. Some of the farmers [?] when the supply was plenty would put it down in jars, and sell it later when the demand was greater. But of course all

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the creameries do that kind of thing today. Summer time we lived mostly on salt meats and fresh vegetables. Most everybody raised something, if they had a yard at all.

“Speakin' [?] about farmin', I'll never forget the time Lizzie Gleason's brother and four other lads got the idee they'd like to try farm life. They went to Goshen—had to go in a wagon from Torrington. When they got to the [?] place, the farmer asked who could mow. Well, none of them could, it seemed. So he asked could they do anything esle. Gleason said he could milk. The farmer put to of them to hayin' and told the other two to feed 2 the horses. They didn't know how to go about it, and they scared the animals [dsarn?] near out of the barn. That night they went in to supper, and the farmer's wife, she set out the feed. Wa'n't nothin' but some cornmeal puddin'. Boys says to the farmer: ‘Is this all they be?’ Says the farmer, ‘There's some bread there, an' crackers. [That?] more do ye want?’ That night they went to bed, and they had to sleep on one of them old cord beds, without springs, and a straw mattress. Straw was so thin the boys woke up in the mornin' they said, and you could have played checkers on the marks on their backs. “They carried in the milk in the mornin' and the woman, she says to the farmer: What's the matter with them cows, be they [?] shrinkin'?’ They got more cornmeal puddin' for breakfast. They stayed there a week and they quit. Said they thought they'd get at least three square meals a day, but all they got was cornmeal puddin' and boiled pork and beans once in a while. When they quit, farmer says: ‘What did ye expect, roast beef and chickens every day?’ “That's gittin' off the subject, ain't it? Well, before the trolleys came, Duff and the other [?] merchants all had terms. Freight came by [?] train from Waterbury, and they all used to have to go [?] over to the depot and get it. The trolley [?] killed that practice. “Wa'n't no bakers. Everybody bought flour by the barrel or half barrel and the women all made bread. Then bakers started comin' up from Waterbury once a week to [peddle?] and a lot of people began buyin' bakers' bread. “You worked from 6:30 o'clock in the mornin' until noon; you went back to work at 1 o'clock and worked till 5:30 that afternoon; then you went up town and did your tradin'. Lots of folks used to hang around the stores and visit; or gab in the post office. Stores was open till 10 o'clock and the saloons was open till 12. There was quite

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a little drinkin' but wasn't so many heavy drinkers. "Nothin' to do at night, as a rule unless there was somethin' goin' on at the Opr'y House. Used to have some pretty good shows there. I remember 3 the first night it opened, show called [?] "The Two Orphans." I was just a young lad then, helpin' out at home, and like a lot of others, I didn't have the money to go. Gus Blakeslee and Ed Fenton ran the place and Ed Bradley, he was sheriff then. There was an old wood house and water closet right outside over on Clay street, and I'll bet there was fifty lads on it, tryin' to see in. I was one of them. Bradley came out, and he says, 'You fellows get off, or you'll get in trouble.'

'But [?] the' was a young lad named Judd, son of the man who run the farm for Aaron Thomas—they lived there then, and JUdd, he says: 'my father hires this house, and you [?] can't put us off here.' Bradley went back in, and the lads began to throw stones—small pebbles, up against the window to attract attention. Bradley came out again and he said this time someone was going down to the lockup. But then Gus Blakeslee came out, and he says to Ed, [?] 'We don't want to have no trouble here,' he says. 'don't you arrest nobody. I'll fix it.' And he goes back in, and pulls down a curtain on the window. That window faced [?] right on the stage, and you could see everything that was goin' on from where we was. After it was pulled down they wa'n't no sense in stayin' there, and in five minutes, the' wasn't nobody on the woodhouse. ("Say, before I forget it, I want to tell you a story about Seth Thomas, the original Seth Thomas. 'Twas told to me by Old Man Cassel, who used to drive team for him—you remember the Cassel house? Ike Cassel was over eighty years old when he told it to me—a dood good sixty years ago. ("Seems he wanted to go to Waterbury to do some tradin' one day, and when old Seth came down to the barn that mornin' Ike asked him could he go. 'Go ahead,' says Seth. [?] 'I'm goin' down myself [??] and if I didn't have such a heavy load I'd give you a ride. [??] Maybe I will have room for you on the way back, but I won't promise you.'

"So Ike goes to Waterbury afoot, and he does his [?] tradin', and 4 along about 12:30 he met old Thomas. The old man says to him: 'Well, Isaac, you better start for home. I got a heavy load here, and a couple of men with me, and here it is comin' on to snow, and I

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guess I won't [?] be able to take you.' So Ike, he says, all right, and he starts for home. Up by the Gate House, old Seth passed him out, and he hollers: 'Peg along, Isaac, peg along. I'd like to pick [?] you up, but I got a heavy load here.' "Just above Frost's Bridge, Ike sees a black object stickin' out of the snow, and he picks it up, and what is it but the Old Man's wallet. Ike knows whose it is, the minute he see it. Well it wa'n't long before Ike met the old man comin' back [and?] [??] the men with him, and two fresh horses. 'Fore Ike got a chance to say [?] [a?] word, the old man hollered: 'Get back home as fast as you can, and take care of them horses' and on he goes in a [??] tearin' hurry. ("So Ike goes home and he left his bundles at his house, and then he went up to the barn—stood right there on Litchfield street where Ben [Curtisn?] used to live—and took care of the horses. The old man came back about nine o'clock, and he was in a very snappish mood, says to Ike—'Here, take care of [?] the horses, these men are about done in. They walked most of the way to Waterbury, and most of the way back.'

'Mr. Thomas—' says Ike

'Don't Mr. Thomas me,' says the Old Man. 'Do as you're [?] told.'

Next mornin' the old man came down to the barn, still snappish, and when Ike tried to talk to him hewas told to mind his own business. Old Seth went down to the shop, and he called all the help together, and he told them how he'd got the money to pay them in Waterbury day before [and] had lost it somewhere. 'Now boys,' he says, 'You'll just [??] have to work until we make some more clocks and sell 'em, and then you'll get what's comin' to you.' 5 ("Well, Ike hung around, and helped do the chores and late that afternoon the old man called in the others, around the barn, and told them the same story. When they'd all gone about their business, Ike pulls out the wallet, and he says to old Seth: 'Do you know who this belongs to?' "The Old Man grabbed it and he says: 'You keep your mouth shut, and say nothin! Just like that. That was all he said. No thank yous, or anything else. Well, couple days later, he called all the help, and he says he'd got a loan somewhere, and he was goin' to pay their wages. He never let on what really happened,

Library of Congress

and neither did Ike. ("Ike said he let him go to Waterbury just to see what the Old Man would do, and then he didn't have the nerve to bring out the wallet in front of the help, so he waited until he got old Seth alone to show it to him. Said the old man would have been [??] madder'n blazes, if he thought Ike was tryin' to put somethin' over on him. ("Wellsir, the Old Man never said no more about it, but when spring came, he began to build that house up on Grand street where Mose Ariel lives now. And early in the fall, he says to old Ike: 'Cassel, I got something I want to show you,' and he took Ike up and showed him the house. "Well, Isaac, what do you think of it?" says he. Ike said it looked pretty good to him Old Seth handed him the deed. 'Here,' he says; 'that's for keepin' your mouth shut.'"

Francis Donovan,

Thomaston,

Friday, Dec. 2 '38.

George Richmond: "The clock business is gone—all gone. We used to have some great times in this town. The young lads now days are too smart. I was down to the gas station the other day, cold enough to freeze the ears off a brass monkey, it was, and a lad came in [?] in a big car, says to the young feller that works there: 'Gimme a change of oil.' And the young lad says, smart as can be: 'What'll you have—light summer oil?' The feller in the car just stepped on the gas and drove away, didn't say nothin.' "The young folks these days wouldn't be satisfied to live the way they had to when I was a kid. Nothin' goin' on in town at all. Not a thing. Remember when they organized this fire department. They only wanted fifty in each company, and they must have had about two hundred applications for each one. They [?] had their pick—took the ones they thought was the best. It was quite a thing to belong to the fire department, I tell you. Had some big times, the firemen did. They used to go to parades all over the state, and they come off with a few prizes too. They had a bunch of kids marchin' with 'em one time, somewheres they went, and the boys each had a big white letter on their breast—spelled 'Crescent,' that

Library of Congress

was the name of the company. Well, later on the Hooks had a big argument with the Hose company, and they split away and formed their own outfit. Called themselves number one and number two. "They had some great affairs up at the Opr'y House. I see one hundred and twenty couples on the Opr'y House floor. Dancin' the California reel. They form a circle on the outside and one on the inside for that, and then they interchange. It's quite a sight. Gus Blakeslee was prompter. They had to pay for each dance. Each man had to pay five cents a dance, that's how they collected the money. 2 "Kids never had no money to spend. Families were big, and there was a lot of mouths to feed, and no extra cash to spare. Do I think they were better off? Sure I do. What've they got today? Cars and radios and whatnot, but still they ain't satisfied. A man with a big family ain't got the time to get dissatisfied. "They were in debt to the stores all the while, most of them. Couldn't meet their bills lots of times at the end of the month. Shops used to pay off once a month years ago, and then they'd all settle up with the [storekeepers?] They're in debt all the time now, ain't they? In debt for their cars and their radios, and soon's they get one thing paid up for on the installment plan, out the go they go and get somethin' else. And what've they got to show for it in the long run. "The' was one merchant here durin' the panic had over \$2500 owed him. And I heard him say once he didn't lose eight dollars of it, all told. That's the way people used to be about debts.

"When the car came along, and people began to buy on the installment plan, things changed fast. The fellow who [?] owns a car takes money a way from local merchants and puts it into pleasure. Years ago, a lad would hire a team and take his girl to Waterbury, and see a show and have supper. And he wouldn't do it again for a couple of weeks. [?] "Maybe the cities are better off today, but the small town ain't. The bigger man is getting the trade today. Cars take out the money, just like the chain store takes it out. They're running the small merchant out of business. When the trolley came in, and then the cars, and the movies, and the radio, then things in this town began to change; 'spose they did everywhere. 3 "I remember the first trolley that came up from Waterbury. Carried back everybody that could crowd onto it for a [?] free ride down. Gave 'em a free ride back at

Library of Congress

night, too. Got to be quite a thing to go to Waterbury, after you could get home at 12 or 12:30 o'clock at night[:?] before that you wouldn't go once a month.

"The movies drove out the old shows, and the radio hurt the movies. Somethin' will come along to drive them out, you wait and see." We are joined by Andrew MacCurrie and Henry Odenwald, who for forty years or so was the town barber. There is bad blood between Mr. Richmond and Mr. MacCurrie, and Mr. Richmond, with a snort of disdain, struggles into his overcoat and stamps out. Mr. Odenwald: "George giving you another earful, was he?" Mr. MacCurrie: "Most of it baloney, no doot." Mr. Odenwald: "Well, George has a pretty good memory. I heard him telling about the Opera House yesterday. They did have some great times there. I belonged to the Liederkrantz Singing Society, and once a year we used to give a concert there. We had some fine artists, come from all over the state, some fine artists. Mr. MacCurrie: "But they'd put the lights out on you at twelve o'clock." Mr. Odenwald: "I remember when they had gas light up in that tower clock." (On the town hall building. ("They had their own plant out here in back and they had gas all through the building.) Mr. MacCurrie: "They needed it, too, on a dark night. When the lights went out you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Old Man Grimshaw, over at the Power House, [?] used to go by the moon. He figured the moon was out 15 days in the month and [??] other 15 you didn't need street lights. One time I had taken a few drops too many on board, and I got on the wrong street coming home. Didn't know where I was, that's the God's 4 truth. So I had to travel all the way back down to the town hall, and look up at that light in the clock and kind of get me bearin's. I finally made it." Mr. Odenwald: "That's no exaggeration. I used to go down to the Liederkrantz of a Saturday night after I'd closed up and sometimes it was so dark I could hardly find my way home. I didn't have any too much to drink, either, only a few beers." "You didn't go out much nights in those days, anyway. No place to go, through the week, unless there was something going on at the Opera House. [?] Mr. MacCurrie: "Of course all the boys used to gather here at the Fire House nights and play cards. You'd see three or four tables going on each side. You could always

Library of Congress

come down here, if you didn't have any place else to go. I lived in Waterbury for a while, one time, and I didn't have any place to go at all. I couldn't stand it."

Mr. Odenwald: "There were clubs and lodges. There was the Criterion club, and there was another one down under Bradstreet's block where they used to play poker.

"On Sundays—now I was telling this up at the house the other day and the kids got a great [?] laugh out of it—on Sundays about 4:30 o'clock there'd be a couple of hundred people over on the depot platform to watch the train come down from Winsted. Nothing else to do, and it was [?] someplace to go. Just walk over and stand there, and watch the train come in and wait until it pulled out, and then go back. Sundays was awful quiet. You come down town and you didn't see a soul on the streets. Once in a while you'd see a team go by."

Mr. MacCurrie: "I used to work for Thompson over at the old Hotel, and sometimes it wasn't quiet on Sundays over there. There'd be a bunch outside waitin' to get in for a drink. Of course he wasn't supposed to sell, but the theory was to let 'em in and give 'em their drinks and then shoo 'em out. [??] He'd hurry 'em along, and ask 'em if they'd had enough, and herd them all towards the door. There'd be another bunch waitin' outside. And half the ones had been in there first would come back with the s[?] second gang."

Mr. Odenwald: "I never liked the beer they sold over there." Mr. MacCurrie: "It was good beer. Ballantine's ale." 'twas better beer than they make now—some new people has got it, since repeal. "The [?] boys over in the castin' shop used to come out durin' the day, in summer time, and get a shot of liquor and a beer chaser. Called it a caster's cocktail. Nobody [?] ever said nothing to them. I guess they knew it was being done. They'd drink ice water in there all day long, and [?] they'd sweat, and [then?] they'd feel the need of something else, and over they'd come for their liquor. And they'd go back and sweat all the more." Mr. Odenwald: "That Thompson, he was a funny chap. I went over there one time to get a room for some musician we had coming for the Liederkrantz, and he told me they never [?] held rooms for anyone. I asked him if he couldn't make an exception and he [?] said no, it was a rule. So I said, what am I going to do with this fellow: and he said: 'Well,

Library of Congress

send him over and we'll take care of him.' He knew he could do it, but he had to make it look hard."

Mr. MacCurrie: "He ran a nice place. Drummers used to come there from all around. If they had to call anywhere in this section, they'd put up there. There wasn't a good hotel in Waterbury, and the only one that could compare with this one was the Conley Inn, in Torrington. That was the best hotel around here."

Mr. Odenweld: "I never [?] liked the beer. "